

Seven Letters to Seven Churches, Part 2: Smyrna
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I. Synagogue of Who?!

Was John of Patmos, the author of the Book of Revelation, anti-Semitic? It certainly sounds this way when he warns the congregation of Smyrna, “I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a *synagogue of Satan*.” Don’t jump to conclusions, however. As we are already finding in this series, when it comes to the Book of Revelation, appearances can be misleading!

Based on other sections of Revelation where John records a vision he says was from God, one would have to conclude that John was not anti-Semitic (or at least God isn’t!). In fact, just the opposite. In his vision in Revelation 7, for instance, John beholds the throne of God around which each and every Jew, from each and every Israelite tribe, is worshipping joyously.¹ But that’s a story for another day. If it is true that the Jews are in such high esteem, then why would John’s letter to the congregation of Smyrna accuse certain Jews in Smyrna of worshipping in the synagogue of Satan?

To understand why, we need to shed our assumptions of what First Century Christians thought of Jews and Judaism – assumptions based primarily on developments that would take place centuries later, not in John’s time. We also need to do our best to walk in John’s sandals, drawing upon what we know historically of his time.

The first image that should come to mind when you think of the Christian community in Smyrna is not of a group of people who enjoy power and privilege, but of a group afflicted by poverty and persecution. If you assume those Christians were people like us, who lived in a time when Christianity was a recognized world religion and the dominant one in the country, whose adherents were generally regarded with respect, or at least tolerated, you will not only be dead wrong about the congregation of Smyrna, but you’ll miss the whole message of the letter, both for them and for us.

Let’s travel back in time to the bustling city of Smyrna at the end of the First Century, shall we?

Smyrna – modern day Izmir – lies 35 miles to the north of Ephesus (where we visited last week). Founded in 1200 B.C.E., Smyrna enjoyed a rich history, with many illustrious

¹ While the vision is of 12,000 people from each of the 12 tribes of Israel (144,000), 12 is the number of “completeness” in the Bible and numbers are used as code language in Revelation. What John is saying is that the number of Israelites is 12 tribes multiplied by 12 (the number of completeness) multiplied by 1,000. In other words, “very, very complete!” In case you still don’t get the implication, John says that he turns and sees “a great multitude *that no one could count*, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb.’” (Rev. 7:9) In other words, everyone is there before God’s throne – not just the tribes of Israel.

figures of history counting Smyrna as their birthplace – including Homer. While Smyrna was smaller than Ephesus– approximately 200,000 residents as opposed to 250-300,000 – it was the second largest city in the region. While it was second in size it was generally considered *first* in quality – kind of like Tucson vs. Phoenix, or San Francisco vs. Los Angeles. Perhaps those who live in Lincoln might add, Lincoln vs. Omaha – but of course, they’d be wrong ...

In John’s day, Smyrna was an extremely prosperous city. Part of what made it so was that the Romans considered Smyrna to be the “glory of Asia” – and treated it that way. They had reason. By John’s day, Smyrna and Rome had enjoyed a special relationship for nearly 300 years.

It started in 195 B.C.E. Rome was fighting for its life against the Carthaginian Empire. It had suffered a major defeat at the city of Cannae that, in the eyes of many, served as Rome’s death blow. The military commander responsible for the Roman defeat was Hannibal, who had led his famous pack of war elephants over the Alps and swept down from the north to engage the Romans at Cannae.

When Rome was defeated, many of Rome’s allies switched sides and began to fight on the side of Carthage. Smyrna did the opposite.

Building a great temple and instituting worship of the goddess Roma, Smyrna doubled down on its allegiance to this “dark horse” Rome, swearing uncompromising allegiance while Rome’s fortunes were highly uncertain. An incredible risk!

A century later, when the public assembly of Smyrna heard that the Roman army was once again in great distress in their war against Mithridates of Pontus (now eastern Turkey), the citizens of Smyrna stripped themselves of their own clothes to send to the freezing Roman soldiers as they fought on.

Consequently, when Rome finally gained control over the entire Mediterranean Basin and everyone wanted to be a friend of Rome, they remembered Smyrna. Cicero called Smyrna “the most faithful of our allies” (Philippics I I.2.5). While Smyrna had since gone into a period of severe decline, the Romans showered Smyrna with gifts and building projects with such enthusiasm that Smyrna was henceforth known as the city that was dead but came back to life, once again becoming Rome’s “glory of Asia” in return *pro singulari fide* “for extraordinary loyalty.” (Livy, History of Rome 39.39.11) Smyrna even outcompeted great cities like Ephesus and Sardis for the privilege – and economic benefits – of building a great temple to the Emperor Tiberius, taking sacrifices to the Roman emperor to new levels. Roman nobility regularly came to visit and vacation there.

All this love and loyalty between Rome and Smyrna had a direct effect on the Christians who lived there at the time. As you can imagine, Smyrna was *extremely* patriotic. If the Emperor demanded that people make a yearly sacrifice to honor him as a god – which he did – they gladly followed suit. When the Emperor persecuted Christians for

refusing to offer this sacrifice, the good folks of Smyrna came down on Christians with extra enthusiasm.

But what about the Jews? They refused to offer sacrifice to the Roman emperor but did quite well for themselves in Smyrna. In fact, after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., Smyrna was one of the favorite new homes for the Jewish diaspora.

The reason why the Jews did so well is because, of all the peoples of the Roman Empire, the Jewish people were the only ones who were not required to offer a burnt sacrifice to the Emperor each year. Basically, Rome had encountered such stiff resistance among the Jews to the recognition of any god but Yahweh that they had given up long ago. So the Jews thrived in Smyrna along with everyone else but the Christians, who were actively persecuted for their failure to sacrifice.

Now, some of you know how ironic this is. After all, for most of the First Century, Christians were not called Christians, but were simply considered Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah. They may have been considered apostate Jews by some, but they were Jews nonetheless. This is how Christians saw themselves, too – as Jews.

When Rome began actively enforcing their requirement of yearly sacrifice to the Emperor, throwing those without official documentation of their sacrifice in jail or sentencing them to death if they didn't comply, followers of Jesus fell under the Jewish exemption from sacrifice and were thus safe.

However, all this began to change when traditional Jews and Jews who were Jesus-followers began to differentiate themselves from one another and Jesus-followers began to be called Christians. Would Christians be granted the same exemption from sacrifice?

Naturally, Christians argued for the exemption on the grounds that they were simply a branch of Judaism, much as Protestantism and Catholicism are branches of Christianity today. But just as today we find Catholics who insist that Protestants aren't "real" Christians, so the traditional Jews of the day insisted that Christians weren't "real" Jews. If this was just an internal dispute, it may not have amounted to anything, but this argument was taken up the chain of the Roman government, which eventually ruled that Christianity was a separate religion. Therefore, every Christian must be in possession of an official document attesting to their yearly sacrifice to the Emperor or they would suffer the consequences.

Can you imagine how Jewish insistence that Jesus-followers were not "real" Jews would rub the Christian community the wrong way – especially in Smyrna that had a very large community of traditional Jews and an even larger community of uber-patriotic loyalists to the Emperor?

Many traditional Jews, of course, were happy to give cover to Christians. It would have been hard for a Roman authority to distinguish a Christian from a Jew in those days and the idea of anyone making a sacrifice to the Emperor as a god would have been

repugnant to any true Jew. However, other members of the Jewish community were not so happy to provide cover to Christians. In fact, they actively ratted them out, either because they hoped to “cleanse” Judaism of the Christian “apostasy” altogether or because a Christian business was competing with their own and they wanted to eliminate the competition.

Now can you hear John’s words as they originally would have sounded in the letter to Smyrna? “I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not but are a *synagogue of Satan*.” According to John, the Spirit of Jesus has no beef with what he calls “true Jews” – that is, Jews who are content to live and let live, allowing Christians to claim the Jewish exemption. The problem is with those “who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a *synagogue of Satan*.”

In the Book of Revelation, “Satan” is code for “Rome.” John does not refer to Rome directly because he has been imprisoned by the Romans and wants to keep his head attached to his shoulders when he criticizes Rome and predicts Rome’s downfall. What John is really saying is that there are “those who say they are Jews but are more loyal to Rome than they are to Yahweh. They are a *synagogue of the Emperor*.”

By now, you may be asking, “What does all this historical stuff have to do with us today?” Well, perhaps the question you should be asking is, “Who would the church of Smyrna be today? And who would be those who are more loyal to ‘Rome’ than they are to God?”

II. Jesus’s Top Three Promises

The famous biblical commentator, William Barclay, once observed, “Jesus promised his disciples three things – that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy, and in constant trouble.”

Nowhere is this statement truer than in Smyrna. Especially in the “trouble” department. No self-respecting patriot wanted to be associated with Christians, making it incredibly hard for Christians to find work. When they did, Christians were often the subject of exploitation by their employers who could always “rat them out” to the Romans if they complained. Consequently, the congregation of Smyrna was desperately poor.

There are two words for “poor” in Greek. One means “poor,” and the other means “you ain’t got a pot to piss in.” In John’s letter to the church in Smyrna, the second term is used. Yet despite its severe poverty, they are considered exceptionally rich in Jesus’s eyes. Rich, and faithful. In fact, Christ has literally nothing negative to say about the congregation, only praise and encouragement to keep doing what they’re doing. If Christ gave a letter grade, it would be A+.

So if we want to find the church of Smyrna today, we need to look for the following characteristics:

- (1) They are Christian.
- (2) They are desperately poor.
- (3) They are poor because they are not considered worthy of citizenship, especially by the hyper-patriotic.
- (4) The congregation would be made of folks who are not, in fact, legal citizens because they are “undocumented.” (Remember that Christians in Smyrna did not possess the legal document that attested to making a sacrifice to the Emperor, thus were considered illegal residents.)
- (5) Despite their challenges, the congregation would be made up of fearless, absurdly happy, loving Christians.

Hmmm. I wonder where such a community could be found?

How about O’Neill, Nebraska?

For the last year we have been supporting a community of people who are:

- (1) Predominantly Christian because they come from Honduras, which is over 80% Christian.
- (2) Desperately poor.
- (3) Poor because they are not considered worthy of citizenship, especially by many who consider themselves especially patriotic.
- (4) Do not possess the necessary documents to make them legal residents.
- (5) Are fearless and absurdly happy despite their circumstances. How else do you describe people who have risked everything – including their lives – to ensure a better life for their children, if not “fearless”? And how else do you describe people who regularly turn down their allotted share of food at the food pantry we are supporting in order to save some for those who come after them in the line, if not absurdly happy – though “absurdly loving and compassionate” might be accurate as well.

If these people in O’Neill are modern-day examples of the Christians in Smyrna, then we know what the Spirit of Jesus would say to such folks. Remember that, of all the seven congregations – most of whom are reprimanded in some way – the congregation of Smyrna receives only praise, support, and encouragement to keep doing what they are doing and not buckle under the pressures that are upon them. “I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”

I wonder who the modern-day “Jews” would be. I’ve heard no reports from O’Neill of Jews harassing these undocumented Christians!

Now, the modern-day equivalent would be some form of *Christian* community. Those “patriots” who slander the modern church O’Neill, who claim to be Christian, but the Spirit says are really a “church of Satan.” Not a church of the actual Satan, for remember that Satan is a metaphor. They are the Church of the Emperor.

Now, lest you think I’m referring to Christians who are Trump supporters, bear in mind that those who are castigated by the Spirit may be highly patriotic but they are not fanatical supporters of the Emperor. Remember that those Jews who turned in the Christians in Smyrna were no more willing to make sacrifices to the Emperor as a god than the Christians were.

No, the group that the Spirit has a problem with is much broader than Donald Trump’s loyal base. It would include anyone whose loyalty to our country and its laws is greater than their loyalty to Jesus and the people whom Jesus loves – regardless of what they think of the President. And regardless of what they think of our country’s current immigration policies.

If John were among us today, he would likely be calling out any person who claims to be a follower of Jesus, yet repeatedly slanders modern-day Smyrnians in O’Neill and elsewhere: who claims that the modern-day Smyrnians are drug dealers, rapists, and thugs when, in fact, they are less likely to commit crimes than native-born Americans; who claims that all the Smyrnians want to do is come here and mooch off the system when, in fact, they are not only the hardest working among us but their presence in small, dying towns across the country tends to be the surest catalysts for renewed economic vitality.

I think John would also have his eye on those who claim to love their neighbors as themselves, yet would prevent modern-day, desperately poor Smyrnians from entering our country even though, if put in a similar position, they would do the same thing. I think John would remind those who worship in the Church of the American Empire that Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor, for they shall be comforted,” and “blessed be the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” – and said “it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a wealthy person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” John would remind us that we ourselves will be knocking on Heaven’s door one day, seeking admission into a Kingdom that is not our own, hoping to be admitted as sons and daughters – and citizens – of this Kingdom.

In this respect, we see that the Book of Revelation is not making a political statement so much as a faith statement. The letter to the congregation of Smyrna makes clear that when the surrounding culture is acting in ways that are antithetical to God’s desires, then true people of faith are called to be (1) fearless, (2) absurdly happy ... and (3) in constant trouble. In other words, in today’s world, it is not possible for Christians of any political persuasion to say “two outta three ain’t bad.”